



Dick Mason//The Observer, File

Morris Capers, a Union County Sheriff's deputy, makes a call on his radio on Friday, May 20, 2022, while on patrol in Elgin.

ELGIN

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Residents of Elgin had strong opinions. One of the primary points of public emphasis was about the cost of a new police department. According to the Elgin City Council, the first year of operation for a new police department was estimated at \$380,000 and the cost moving forward would vary.

"With the economy the way it is, how can we afford it? What about the city liability if something happened and someone were to sue the city?" asked one resident and business owner.

Other residents pointed out how the cost of living and expenses were going to continue to increase over the years, meaning the price of maintaining the police department would increase.

Hylton-Shaffer and Burgess seconded the sentiment. Hylton-Shaffer said she was concerned with ensuring the city does not go bankrupt from needing to support a police department.

"Great people have applied for the Elgin Police Department, but it's a cost thing," Burgess said.

In comparison, the contract Sheriff Cody Bowen offered to the city opened at just more than \$315,000 for the first year. Additionally, it had pricing laid out and guaranteed for six years.

Bowen explained how he recalculated the cost to lower the price for Elgin in the new contract. Previously the cost was calculated at the price of the highest paid deputies on the force. However, Bowen changed the pricing model to be based on lower tiers of pay.

"I'm paying those guys regardless of if they are patrolling in Elgin or back in the office in La Grande,"

the sheriff said. "So I'm finding ways to absorb that cost in my budget and not passing that onto you."

Bowen was transparent about wanting a six-year contract to protect and provide job security for his deputies.

The council seemed torn on the contract. Councilor Steve Gresham was worried about the length of time Elgin would be locked into the contract and reminded everyone the sheriff also was an elected position. Burgess countered by saying the length of the contract worked in their favor for that very reason — a new sheriff would not be able to come in and change the pricing.

Residents also were concerned with how long it would take to get a new police department up and running. The current contract with the sheriff's office ends July 1, which would have left Elgin without coverage until it hired and trained a new police force.

"That is insane. And with gas prices being the way it is, we're on the brink of civil unrest," said one resident.

The final concern was about personnel coverage and response times. Currently, the sheriff's office provides three deputies for Elgin. A new police department would start with a chief and one officer.

"We'd be going down to one officer, with more to do than one guy can do," one man in the crowd said.

Only one resident in attendance spoke in favor of creating an Elgin Police Department.

"How much protection do you have with the county?" he asked.

Once the public comment portion of the session ended, the council unanimously voted to move forward with the new contract to retain the services of the Union County Sheriff's Office.

STREETS

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during the day while work is being done. Traffic will be diverted to Fourth and 16th streets during the closures.

The repair work will involve a grinding inlay process. A layer of pavement will be ground down and the ground-out asphalt removed. Next, a new layer of asphalt will be installed to restore the structural strength of the roadway.

Carpenter said it would be much easier to simply place a new layer of asphalt over the portion of Gekeler Lane. This cannot be done, though, he said, because it would result in the roadway having an uneven surface, in some cases rising above the curb running along it, and would impede water drainage.

The grinding inlay work will be done on the 400-yard portion of C Avenue from Fourth Street to B Avenue and the 800-yard portion of Gekeler Lane running from B Avenue to Aries Lane. The Gekeler Lane project should take about a week, Carpenter said.

Other projects

The Gekeler Lane project is one of three La Grande will be tackling over the next year. Another, which could start as early as July, will involve two aging stretches of roadway on Third Street and G Avenue. The Third Street stretch will run from F Avenue to I Avenue, and the G Avenue stretch from Second Street to Fourth Street. A layer of

asphalt 2 inches thick will be placed on the roadway.

The paving work on both Third Street and G Avenue will each take one week to complete. The project will be paid for with funding from a federal Surface Transportation Block grant.

The third project will repair eight stretches of roadway in La Grande that are also in poor condition.

Repaving will take place on Penn Avenue from Pine to Willow streets; Jefferson Avenue from Second to Walnut streets; L Avenue from Second to First streets; D Avenue from First to Second streets and Fourth to Sixth streets; Pine Street from Jackson to X avenues; Z Avenue from Depot to Spruce streets; and Pioneer Street from Palmer Avenue north to Optimist Park.

Carpenter said the stretches of roadway on Willow Street, Jefferson Avenue, L Avenue, Fourth Street, Pine Street, Z Avenue and Pioneer Street are in such bad shape that it would not be cost effective to do patchwork repairs. He said adding a full layer of asphalt to each of the eight sections would cost the city less in the long run.

This set of projects, which will be funded by a federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement grant, will not begin until 2023.

Carpenter said he is delighted that funding is available to do the road projects now on the city's docket.

"This is an exciting opportunity," he said.

SUMMER

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and tied the monthly record high for July originally set in 2002.

Additionally, the 108-degree mark tied the record for the all-time maximum temperature originally recorded in 2002.

"Last year was a bump away from the normal patterns," Ann Adams, a National Weather Service assistant forecaster, said. "We had a larger, stronger, dry-air mass over the Northwest and it stayed put last year. It persisted over our area and heated up the entire West. We just happened to be under the deepest part of that ridge."

Weather that warm is not expected in the area in the near future, but temperatures are definitely going to be on the increase.

"It looks like later this week, it will warm up," Nierenberg said on Tuesday, June 21. "The 8-14-day outlook is calling for above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation into the last part of June, first part of July. I would think La Grande would probably hit 90 at some point in the next couple of weeks."

There is still time to set a new record for the latest day on the calendar that the first 90 degree day comes to Wallowa or Union counties. In Wallowa County, the latest occurrence is July 30, 1907. Union County's



Isabella Crowley/The Observer

Veterans' Memorial Pool, at Pioneer Park in La Grande, on Tuesday, June 21, 2022, has yet to bring in crowds avoiding hot weather. The pool offers lap swim, exercise classes and recreational swim throughout the summer.

is far more recent — July 24, 2011.

It also looks like the region will begin to dry out from what was an abnormally wet spring. The National Integrated Drought Information System said May was the sixth wettest on record in Union County since records started being kept 128 years ago.

The National Weather Service, who partners with cooperative observers like the Oregon Department of Forestry to measure rain

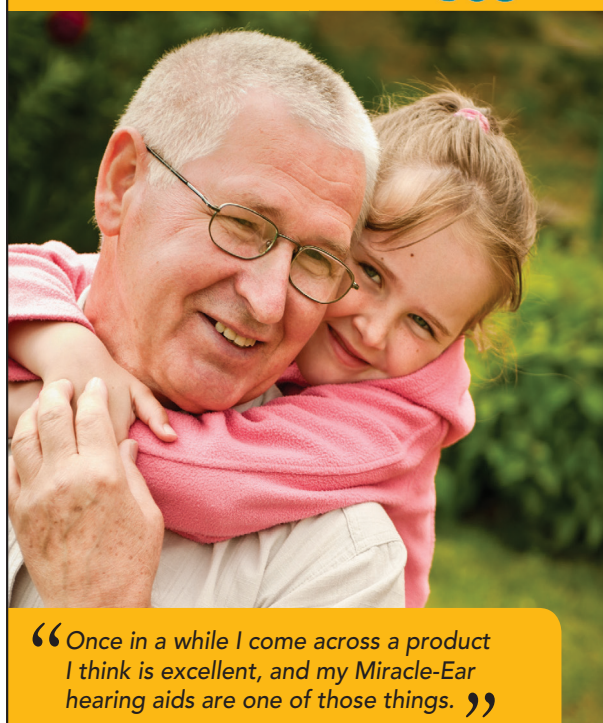
levels, reported 5.44 inches of rainfall in La Grande during May, which was 2.28 inches wetter than normal.

The wet spring and cool temperatures have helped keep wildfires at bay — for now.

"We've been relatively wet, so that's going to put it off," Nierenberg said of fire season. "These warmer temperatures are going to help us dry out, so we are still, I would think, probably by mid to late July, going to start having fire problems."

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